

*Faith Hogan*

THE  
GUEST  
HOUSE  
BY THE  
SEA



*An Aria Book*

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Head of Zeus  
First Floor East  
5–8 Hardwick Street  
London EC1R 4RG

[WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM](http://WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM)

For James xx



*June*

*Monday: The first  
day of the season*

# I

## *Esme*

It was nonsense, complete and utter nonsense. It would take more than some fancy doctor telling Esme Goldthorpe she was going blind to stop her running the Willows. It had been in her family for almost two hundred years, run by the women of generations before her. Strong women, just like her own mother, who had died right here, just as she had been about to book in a party of five. And Esme had long since decided she would be no different; she would keep this place open, right up to the end. It would take more than a leaking roof or a notion of frailty to make her stop running the guest house. Sell out to the Fenlons indeed! That would be the day, over her dead body. She'd show them; there were years ahead of her yet and she intended to live every single one of them just as she pleased.

Now, where did she leave the guest book? She was quite sure that their first guest, Joel Lawson, was due to book in tomorrow.

Of course, Esme could ask Marta to help her find that book, but she wasn't completely helpless – regardless of

what those eye tests showed. It had to be here somewhere; after all, she'd had her hands on it only a day ago. If only she could remember what she'd done with it or maybe, more accurately, where Marta had tidied it away. Marta had obviously been polishing again, the sour tartness of vinegar and lemon juice still lingered on the air. Esme wrinkled her nose as she searched everywhere she could think of. If right was right, it should be left on the Victorian desk that doubled as the guest reception. The last place she could imagine anyone wanting to store it was up here on this high shelf, but with Marta flying through the place armed with a duster in one hand and what smelled like a demonising array of cleaning products, well, the devil himself couldn't predict where anything would land. The strong, energetic woman from the Basque Country who had lived with Esme for over a decade cleaned more thoroughly than a dose of her grandmother's salts.

Only a few years earlier, Esme would have reached this shelf easily if she stood on her tippy toes – well, almost reached it. Esme dragged the low coffee table across the rug towards the sideboard and felt her way along until she knew she was at roughly the right spot. The table was sturdy, as robust as she'd need to balance safely; she was only a tiny woman, small and birdlike, where once she had been young and tough. It wasn't heavy; she edged it gently against the wall before her with her shin. Position was everything. She arranged it right at the centre of the old sideboard. It was all about reaching and patting her way along the uppermost shelves.

The table wasn't even a foot off the ground and wide enough for both of Esme's slippers; it was only a step, really.

It wasn't all that long ago since she'd scaled the rickety winding staircase in the nearby church without a second thought to sing with the village choir every Sunday. One deep breath and she was up. She felt her way along the shelf, her hands splayed, reaching deliberately as deeply as possible towards the back. Dust. She could feel it under her fingertips, soft and yet grainy. Damn, she should have tucked a cloth in her waistband; honestly, she thought, was there no beginning or end to getting this place in shape for the season?

She used the cuff of her sleeve to dust off the empty shelf. It was no good. The remains of what she assumed was a dead fly stuck stubbornly. She wet her thumb with a little spit, rubbed vigorously and perhaps it was this careless movement that unsettled her balance, because just as she was moving her cuff towards the spot again, she felt a disturbing wobble. Was the table about to go from beneath her? No, she knew as she drifted, swaying for what seemed like an age, over and back, over and back, it wasn't the table. She was suddenly light-headed. And then, as the room rose up around her, like an incoming, unstoppable tide, she was falling.

The thud when she hit the ground seemed inconsequential for a woman of her age. She lay there for a moment and began to laugh. Shock. It was ludicrous; she couldn't be lying on the floor of the main hall. She had far too much to do. She tried to pull herself up, but it was no good. Bruising against her thigh, she felt her mobile phone. She eased it out of her pocket, only mildly aware of the film of sweat beginning to pulse from her pores. She'd have to ring Marta to help her, which would result in a good-natured but stern



lecture, rolled eyes and one of Marta's frowns, which filled her voice with even more worry, regardless of how much she believed Esme could not see. Perhaps, if she just rested, for a little while, the light-headedness would settle and nobody need know how silly she had been – falling off a coffee table indeed!

She held the phone in her hand for a moment. Suddenly, her head felt much too heavy to hold up and she was bleakly aware of a creeping wooziness. She was drowning in fatigue. Just in time, she hit the contacts button. At the very top, Marta had saved an emergency number with a line of capital 'A's. Esme smiled, remembering those days they spent trying to figure out how to use the mobile.

Then, she felt it; the most unbearable, crippling spasm – invading her system like venom, creeping slowly along her left calf. It was a radiating, chilling agony that briefly absorbed every thought, ominous in both its ferocity and stealth. *Who was she kidding? She was just a silly old woman and it was all too much for her.* Oh God. She hit the As, but her grip had deserted her and the phone fell from her hand.

'Marta,' she shouted, but it was little more than a murmur. She tried to gather up all her strength – 'Marta' – and by some miracle within seconds Marta appeared with her calm assuring voice, briskly moving about her. Assessing the damage done and then, vaguely, Esme was aware of her gently moving her wrist, feeling for a pulse, taking her cardigan from around her own shoulders and placing it over Esme.

For the most part, Marta's words drifted past her, she was vaguely aware of that familiar accented voice, 'Oh, Esme,

what have you done?’ Esme scrunched closed her eyes, tensed her whole body as if the pain might pass, but it didn’t.

‘... *fall, maybe unconscious, or perhaps a fracture, oh God,*’ Marta was saying into the phone, but darkness fell then as the pain finally engulfed what remained of Esme’s awareness.

*A month before the  
season begins...*

## 2

### *Cora*

Up until the first dance, everything had been perfect. It was such a beautiful wedding, all that Connor and Lydia had hoped for and more. Everything had gone off with hardly as much as a hiccup; the best man's speech had been funny and just the right side of tasteful. There were no embarrassing stories or bad language to upset the parish priest, who could at times be a bit of a dry stick. And even Father O'Sullivan himself had managed to give a sermon that was both sincere and entertaining, which might have been a first. The guests had arrived from all over, with a fair contingent from London who looked as if they'd never been further than the last stop of the Tube line before this. Connor and Lydia had more friends, it seemed, than Cora could count.

The women turned up in hats – when had hats come back into fashion? Cora had worn a feathery affair perched jauntily on her newly done hair, just to keep Lydia happy, but then she was the mother of the groom, and she had even persuaded Michael into a morning suit. Cora had admired him in his steely grey waistcoat, of course she hadn't said

anything as she'd straightened his cravat, they'd long since stopped mentioning what the other looked like much beyond an undone button or a stain that hadn't shifted in the wash.

It really was the perfect wedding.

Cora enjoyed every second of it, until that moment.

She wasn't even sure what it was about seeing her son and his new bride dancing to a song that was such a hackneyed wedding tune it shouldn't have stirred anything more in her than admiration and joy for the lovely couple. Maybe she did know what it was and she just wasn't brave enough to put the words on it. She felt huge, hot tears well at the back of her throat – a mixture of joy and loneliness churned up in her after such an emotional day.

She was standing, an insignificant part of the large circle that swayed around the newlyweds, the band belting out the well-loved chorus. Even Connor rubbed his eyes and she knew he too was overwhelmed. He was filled with love for this girl who had stolen his heart four years earlier when they were both post-grad students in university.

The guests around Cora were heaving closer to the floor. Lydia's sister Lenore and the best man had taken up position to join the bride and groom for the first dance. Next it would be the turn of the parents. Lydia's parents were older than Cora and Michael, but she watched them take to the floor with a confidence that spoke as much about their ease with each other as their ability to dance together.

Michael was not a dancer, but he'd promised Lydia he would do one circuit, just one, and then he was off the hook for the rest of the evening. Connor nodded towards them now, it was their turn to join the dancing and Cora turned

to Michael next to her. He placed one hand firmly on her hip; with the other he grabbed her hand. For a moment, she wondered if perhaps he'd been awake on some of those evenings she'd been engrossed in *Strictly Come Dancing*. They shuffled awkwardly about the floor. There was no conversation and she wondered about saying something, but honestly, she wasn't sure what to say to him.

Cora looked up into her husband's face and that was the moment she realised Michael was not really there any more. Well, that's to say, he was standing right in front of her, but he might as well have been sitting on the moon, because, suddenly, she was completely alone. In that split second it felt as if her very core shifted, as if the whole dance floor had been tipped at the slightest angle and her happy equilibrium sloshed over the side and so there was a discharging gap within her. She could almost feel her natural ease spill away from her. It was a strange sensation of being emptied of something vital, when she should have been brimming with nothing more than complete and utter joy.

Cora's mind began to race. When was the last time Michael had put his arm around her? She couldn't even remember the last time they'd held hands. It was strange, she could recall very clearly the *first* time they held hands. She was nineteen, he was twenty-three, and they were walking back from the local night club. His hand had been big and strong and, when she closed her eyes now, she could still remember how it felt when it enveloped her own. Her heart had missed a beat, in the way it does when you're young and it feels as if the simple things are absolutely momentous.

Surely they should be sharing this moment, and they were,

but somehow they weren't. In the important ways, they were a million miles apart from each other. Even though he was holding her tightly in his arms, there might as well have been the Suez Canal running between them, because they were in different worlds, never mind different continents.

How had this happened? How on earth had they become strangers while living in the same house and sleeping in the same bed for the last thirty years? Cora thought the music would never end; she felt like a fraud. No. She felt let down, cheated in some way by the happiness that seemed to be all around her and at the same time she was suffocating in its scarcity.

When the band finally milked the last chorus from the song – God how many times could they play the same string of lines over and over? – Cora stepped away from Michael. And then, without waiting another second, she raced from the reception. She needed to breathe, to make sense of the feelings that had completely overtaken her. She stepped outside into the cool night air. The sky was filled with stars, a few smokers standing about chatting beneath an awning at the side of the hotel. She walked, as steadily as her kitten heels allowed, towards the car park. She had no real destination in mind; she just needed to escape. She rounded the car park, which was far too brightly lit, and panic rose up in her. What was she doing here? How had things turned out like this? How could she go on living with Michael when it felt as if there was nothing left between them any more? Tears rolled down her cheeks and Cora cried as if her heart was broken, because, maybe, suddenly, she realised it just might be.





*One week before the  
season begins...*

### 3

#### *Phyllis*

Phyllis wasn't sure when it had started, exactly, but she knew precisely where it would finish, even if she didn't want to admit that to herself, and she certainly wasn't ready to offer up her thoughts to anyone else at this point. It was early days. Wasn't that what people said in order to make things seem better? Maybe it worked for slow-growing roses that didn't take off in their first year. But this was different. Alzheimer's and dementia didn't get any better with time, they got worse. This much she knew from the bitter experience of watching her father-in-law slowly drift away from the people he loved.

Today, with the sun shining and the garden almost bursting with summer colour, it was easier to convince herself that it was all in her imagination. She watched Kurt push the mower in straight lines up and down the lawn. There had always been a precision to him and it was still there today. She remembered so clearly the first time she saw him. He had rented the ground-floor flat in the tall Edwardian house where she and Esme had taken over the first floor shared before them by their aunts.

Phyllis smiled now, thinking of those first days, when she'd watched him come and go about his business, always making her heart skip. It had been love at first sight for her. Now, Phyllis stood a little back from the window and took a deep satisfied breath. Today was a good day. Everything was going to be fine today.

Well, hopefully. She caught a glimpse of her own reflection, hair uncombed, still in her dressing gown, although she'd been up since before five, making Kurt breakfast, talking him out of putting on a suit and commuting to the job he'd retired from years earlier. She looked worn out. She rubbed her eyes, knowing her hair was standing on top of her head, and sighed. Her temples throbbed from lack of sleep, she was overtired and grimy. She needed to have a shower and brush her teeth, but still, she was reluctant to take her eyes off him just yet.

This morning had been hard. Another deep breath. She could admit that now. She smiled automatically as he turned the mower and worked his way back towards the kitchen window, waving at her and pointing towards the hedge where he had perhaps spotted a flower or bird worth noticing.

He's fine, a little voice inside her urged. Just five minutes, in and out of the shower, it'll take him that at least to finish the lawn. And he would finish it. She was pretty sure of that, habit would surely win out over anything else.

She moved quickly upstairs towards the bedroom. She had a five-minute shower down to such a fine art; if there was an Olympic medal, she would surely be gold standard at this point.

The warm water blasting on her face and shoulders was such a relief, wakening her and caressing her skin as if to soothe her nerves and ease away her tension. The noise of it was a blessed balm from trying to tune into the mower outside. Hair dripping, feet still slippery on the tiles, she pulled open the bedroom door to hear the lawnmower still humming along. She imagined Kurt doing his best to get as near to the verge as possible and manoeuvre around the flower beds and the narrow crazy paving that ran beneath the clothes line.

The sound of the lawnmower was like a pacifier and Phyllis lingered long enough to dry herself properly – a rare indulgence – wash her teeth and dab a few fingers of moisturiser on her face. It was amazing, she almost felt human.

It was only as she drifted downstairs, wrapped in a gentle reverie of temporary well-being, that something about the sound outside jarred in her awareness.

The lawnmower was not moving.

There was a whining sound coming from it, as if the motor was stuck, perhaps with something caught in the blades.

Dear God. No.

She raced to the back door, flung it open. She was standing on the lawn before realising she wasn't wearing any shoes and the grass still damp from the dewy morning mist seeped in icy coldness through her from the ground up.

'Kurt.' She shouted his name, over and over. It was not a big garden, but she spurted to the end, digging through the mature shrubs that had been planted over their almost forty years living here.

The lawnmower was left abandoned on a pile of cut grass.

She sent up a prayer of thanks, because part of her had feared the worst, that Kurt might be knotted in the blades. Had she really thought she might find him torn to ribbons? She was shaking now, but she tried to calm herself with the uneasy thought that there couldn't be much worse than that.

At the back of the garden, through the thick hedging, the railway track ran along, silent now, but too often busy with morning and evening trains ferrying people in and out of the city. She tried to stay calm, checking for gaps in the perimeter of the garden; although she couldn't see any, still she didn't quite trust herself at this point. The rail people checked along these fences regularly. They couldn't risk a child getting through.

'Phyllis.' She heard her name called from the other end of the garden. 'Phyllie, are you back yet?'

Kurt was standing at the back door. His shirt undone, his vest covered over in what looked like mud, but as she made her way closer, she realised it was coffee. It smelled strong and, when she laid her hands on it, it was still warm.

'Oh, Kurt. What have you done?' She shepherded him back into the house, she would have to wash everything and pray he hadn't managed to scald himself with the hot liquid.

'I thought we'd have coffee, in the garden, but I couldn't find you and I tried...' He looked towards the front door which was wide open now, their next-door neighbour standing on the doorstep.

'Is he all right?' Their neighbour, Prisha, filled the doorway wearing a look of concerned embarrassment; it stretched her lips into a joyless smile. She lingered on the threshold, unsure

if she should come in or not. 'I found him on the street; he seemed to be confused...'

'I'm fine.' Kurt was always a little abrupt after one of these episodes. 'Honestly, can a man not go out and prune his roses without all this nonsense.' He stomped up the stairs, pushing past Prisha and almost knocking her over.

'He's fine,' Phyllis said wearily. 'Thanks for making sure he got in safely, sorry about...'

'Don't worry, I just hope you're both going to be okay?' Prisha looked up the stairs and back towards Phyllis again. And there it was, the one thing Phyllis didn't ever want to see, a mixture of concern and pity in people's eyes.

'We're grand. Really.' Phyllis tried to sound reassuring as she closed out the door firmly behind Prisha.

Suddenly, she was exhausted, washed out with the uncertainty and responsibility of it all. She couldn't bear to think of their son Rob having to shoulder this too. He had enough to worry about, a single dad with not a lot to look forward to in life as it was.

She slid to the second step on the stairs, sat there for a while, trying to pull herself together, and then she heard it. The hushed keening noise of her husband; crying softly so as not to upset anyone else. She padded up the stairs to him and seeing him there, sitting on the bed, his face drenched with tears, his clothes stained with coffee, her heart began to break all over again.

'Oh, Phyllis, I'm so sorry. It happened again, I didn't mean it to happen, I just...'

'What happened?' she asked in her steadiest voice, although beneath the surface, if he'd looked into her eyes,

he'd see how weak she really felt, because it was all so hard to understand and they were still at that stage where she hoped, maybe, if she understood she could do something about it.

'I don't know what happened, but...' He shuddered with what she supposed was anguish or, worse, maybe fear. He was losing *himself* and she had to constantly remind herself that it was probably a lot worse than losing your husband.

'It wasn't too bad. Just a little coffee spilled, that's all.'

'But it's not about the coffee, though, is it? We both know where this goes. I don't want to be a burden; you won't let me down, when the time comes, will you? I don't want to be like my father, I don't want you to have to live like my mother.'

'Don't be daft.' She hugged him close to her. She even managed to sound carefree. 'We're not your parents, you're just forgetting yourself occasionally, it was something very different for your father.' She pulled him even closer, but there was no ignoring the fact that he felt different, somehow, less like her Kurt with every passing day than before.

'We made a promise, I still remember that.' He pulled away from her, pinned her with those familiar eyes. 'You know what I want you to do, when the time comes.'

'Of course, but we don't even know that there's anything wrong yet.' It was a lie. Just because a doctor hadn't confirmed it, didn't mean she didn't know. Kurt knew too, he knew at times like this, and it was breaking her heart that his worst fears were coming home to roost.

'All we need is a little holiday, both of us, we haven't been anywhere for ages,' she said brightly and it was true. Maybe

that's all they needed, a little holiday away from it all. It might do them both the world of good. And instantly, she knew, there was only one place she could go. She would ring her oldest friend Esme, nothing could possibly happen to Kurt at the Willows in Ballycove, could it?